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ABSTRACT

Skilled reading requires the reader to have adequate language competence and experience. As one reads, one anticipates what is written and checks one's guesses through the application of phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules. English as a Second Language (ESL) students are hindered by a different conceptual framework. For them, the grapheme/phoneme correspondences lack any apparent system; the grammatical patterns are confusing and many signals which aid in comprehension are not recognized. Lack of knowledge of English hinders the ability to choose cues, while the wrong choice or uncertainty make it difficult to confirm or reject them, thus curbing the hypotheses-testing process of skilled reading. When trying to read English, ESL students are faced with difficulties due to lack of language skills and possibly conceptual skills, upon which reading depends. (WR)

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LANGUAGE, THINKING AND READING

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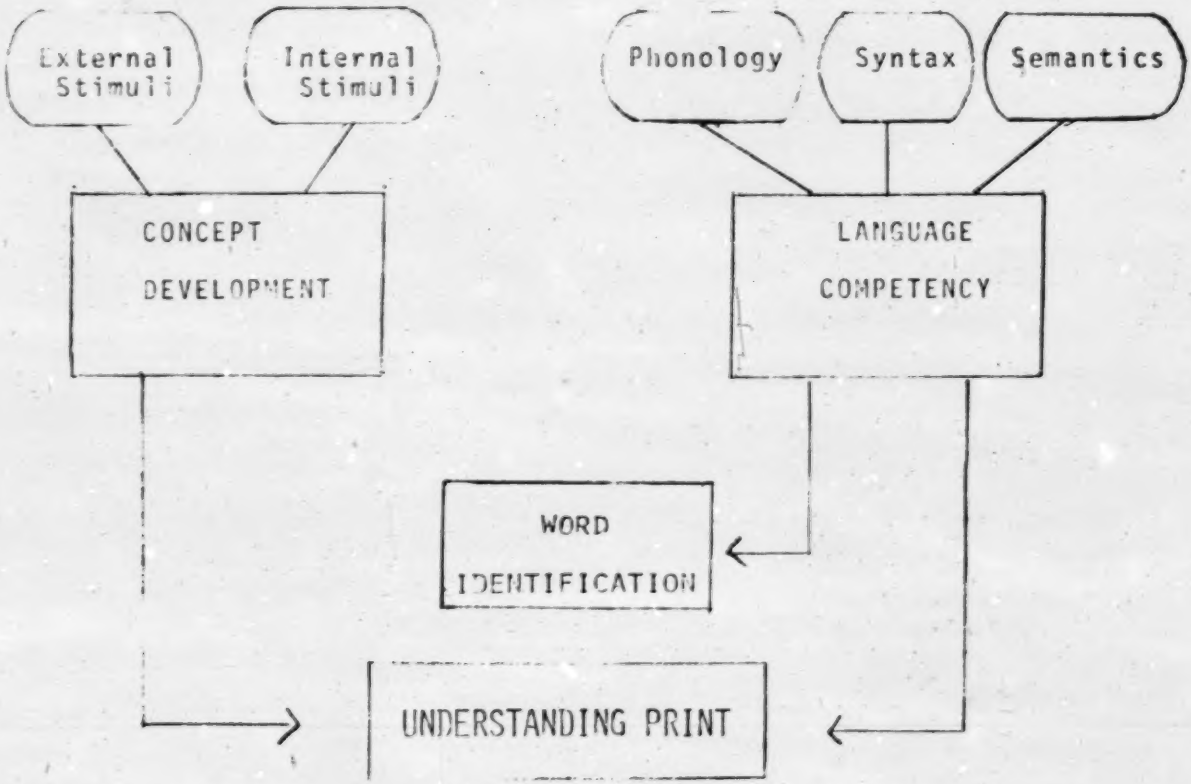
Reading is a complex activity dependent upon the thinking and language skills of the reader. The reader sees print and identifies it as a system of orthography. Familiarity with the distinctive features of the alphabet and language skills enable the reader to identify words. The conceptual development of the reader as well as his language skills provide the means for understanding the printed message. Figure 1 illustrates the input of concept development and language competency to reading.



THINKING AND READING

Understanding print is directly related to the reader's experience with ideas expressed, and the concepts he has developed from these ideas. Concepts can be formed at three levels - concrete, functional, and abstract. If the reader's concepts are predominantly concrete, new information will be related to existing concepts only when there are common concrete characteristics. In order to increase the individual's level of understanding, therefore, his conceptual development must be broadened to include all three levels. This development is influenced by the person's physiological capabilities to receive and interpret external and internal stimuli, the

cultural framework underlying his perception of the world around him, and the kinds of experiences he has had. The printed word is a meaningless entity unless it can be associated with an experience and/or concept.

LANGUAGE AND READING

Language is the symbolic system used to convey thought from one person to another. Written language takes on a second set of symbols to represent the oral language, thereby allowing person's thoughts to be conveyed across time and space. The reader recognizes orthography as symbols of language and words (language) as symbols for thought. Reading, therefore, requires knowledge of both symbolic systems.

Orthography consists of graphemes which the skilled reader recognizes as symbols of speech sounds. In written English, same graphemes represent different sounds. For example, the letter *(s)* represents the sound /s/ in the word, *horse*, but in the word, *hose* it represents the sound /z/. The same sound may also be spelled in different ways. The sound /f/ may be spelled *f* as in *fun*, *gh* as in *enough* and *ph* as in *phone*. The identification of the appropriate sound in a particular word stems from the reader's knowledge of the language. The knowledge of the phonological rules allows him to accept the so-called irregularities of English orthography. For example, the reader is able to identify the different sounds represented by the grapheme *a* in the words *nature* and *natural*. The sound shift in this word pair is determined by the grammatical function of the word. Words are seen in light of a particular sentence; accurate identification of words requires awareness of the syntax.

Knowledge of the language provides the reader with the rules of syntax, thereby allowing him to see the relationships of words within a sentence and/or passage. Meaning is obtained by analyzing the syntax. Consider these sentences:

(1) The little boy planted a flower.
(2) A flower was planted by the little boy.

The meaning is the same for both; however, to realize this, one has to see the connection between *(2)* and *(1)* to be able to convert sentence *(2)* into the form of sentence *(1)*. The reader then reacts to the semantic elements in light of his conceptual/experiential framework. The above sentences would be accepted as possibilities, valid for all readers. Consider this sentence: *A flower planted a little boy.* Although it is structurally acceptable, the semantic constraints of the language do not permit the reader to accept such a statement.

Skilled reading is an anticipatory activity; the reader looks

at print with an expectancy of receiving certain information. Using the least possible cues - grapho/phonological, syntactical and semantic-he confirms or rejects his hypothesis. If rejected on the basis of the cues processed, he revises his guess and confirms its accuracy. The knowledge of phonological, syntactical and semantic constraints allows him to rely on this hypothesis-testing activity. Without it, the reader has to resort to mere word identification, hampering his ability to obtain meaning directly from print.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ESL STUDENT

Conceptual development, experiential background and language competency are limiting factors for the ESL student trying to acquire adequate reading skills. Most materials are culturally oriented to the American way of thinking, which poses difficulties in obtaining the accurate meaning. His reactions to the printed matter, assuming that the words are identified, are based on concepts derived from social, geographic, economic, and linguistic experiences which are very different from the American author's with whom communication is being sought. Wrong meanings or shades of meanings may be assigned to the passage resulting in distorted understanding or none at all.

When confronted with English in print, the ESL student does not have a set of rules with which to operate. For him the grapheme/phoneme correspondences are lacking any apparent system; the grammatical patterns are confusing, and he does not recognize many signals which aid in comprehension. Lack of knowledge of English hinders his ability to choose cues; the wrong choice or uncertainty makes it difficult to confirm or reject them, thus curbing the hypotheses - testing process of skilled reading. When trying to read English, the ESL student is being faced with difficulties due to lack of language skill and possibly conceptual skill, upon which reading depends.

SUMMARY

Skilled reading requires the reader to have adequate language competence and experience. As he reads, he anticipates what is written and checks his guesses through the application of phonological, syntactic and semantic rules. The ESL student is hindered by a different conceptual framework and inadequate skills.

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